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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to show how the resources of the community can be incorporated into a foreign language program. The term "community," as used here, refers to the educational component of a district, local political organizations, religious groups, cultural organizations, professional organizations, civic organizations, community and public service agencies, parents, and students. The first step to involving the community in foreign language teaching and learning is a survey to determine exactly what assets are available. Questionnaires can elicit information about areas of interest from students, school staff, and other community members. (Sample questionnaires are appended to the paper.) Once the surveys have been completed, the foreign language department can organize the following types of activities: (1) class trips, (2) foreign language fairs, (3) volunteer work, (4) work-study programs, (5) contests, (6) community welcoming committees, and (7) lecture and consulting programs. (PMP)

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USING COMMUNITY RESOURCES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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USING COMMUNITY RESOURCES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Introduction

The use of community resources in foreign language teaching can be an invaluable aid in developing and maintaining a viable, effective, and exciting foreign language program. The school is a microcosm of the community it serves and of society as a whole. As such, the needs, interests, goals, and aspirations of the community are of prime importance to educators in an age when variety and specialization are such important factors in our educational programs. Active involvement of the community in the educational process can result not only in an enriched scholastic and extra-curricular program for our students but also in a rewarding experience for the entire community.

The objective of this paper is to show how the resources of the community can be incorporated into a foreign language program. The writer is cognizant of the limitations of many school communities in respect to location, size, or natural resources. Attempts will be made, therefore, to offer suggestions as to how even the most limited school community can utilize the resources that it has at hand.

Broadening the Classroom Experience

Community resources can be used to broaden the classroom experience. Too often, educators have been accused of teaching material that cannot be used outside of the classroom. Despite the practical value of foreign language study, we have also been included in this indictment. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to make language study an area that extends beyond the daily schedule and the walls of the school.

The term "community," as used in this discussion, refers to the educational component of a district (elementary and secondary school staffs, college and university staffs); local political organizations; religious institutions and organizations; cultural organizations, e.g., museums, choral groups, theater groups, dance companies; professional organizations (the local Bar association, medical association, chamber of commerce, trade unions); civic organizations such as the Rotary, Lions, Elks; and community and public service agencies (hospitals, local social security agency, better business bureau, electric company, gas company, telephone company, etc.). Parents and students also form part of this "community," and it is usually through them and the staff of the school that contacts are made with the other components of the community.

While we recognize the value of involving the community in the educational process, we often do not see the reciprocal value of such an involvement, especially in the foreign language program. By working more closely with the community, students become aware of the great variety of career opportunities it has to offer. In addition, they gain humanitarian values through community service and volunteer work. They also see how the foreign language they are studying is related to their professional or avocational interests. The organizations acquire personnel, good will, and a sense of accomplishment in helping young people become more responsible citizens. It is at best a learning experience for both parties. The students learn how society functions, while the community becomes responsive to the needs and interests of future generations. Both parties are able to do a better job: the educational community is better equipped to educate its students, and the other agencies are supported by interested and able students. The bonds that are made are lasting, and their true worth probably can never be quantitatively evaluated.

Involving the Community in Foreign Language Teaching

Where does one begin? In order to know to what extent the community can become involved in the foreign language program, a survey should be conducted to determine what assets are available. A questionnaire within the school itself can elicit from teachers and students such information as principal area of interest, secondary areas of interest, hobbies and pastimes, language(s) spoken at home, travel, membership in organizations, and unique interests or abilities. This becomes a reference for the foreign language teacher who wishes to bring another personality or point of view into classroom activities. For example, in a discussion of Paris, the teacher might invite a colleague or a student who has visited Paris to join the class on a particular day. Pictures, slides, movies, or realia acquired on the trip may be brought in to enhance the discussion. The guest may be able to provide the students with leads for pen pals. A teacher or student who is a "ham" radio operator may create interest in forming a club that would record short-wave broadcasts or messages. Knowledge of the birthplace of the students' parents and of the languages spoken at home can be utilized to provide an extensive list of foreign language activities leading to individualized student projects, lively class discussions, and increased motivation for foreign language study. (A sample questionnaire is included on page 8.)

A similar questionnaire (see page 11) can be prepared and sent to the other members of the "community" described earlier. However, an additional--and very important--section of this questionnaire should include references to special projects the organization or agency may be involved in which might require some expertise in a foreign language. Outside agencies can be very receptive to be-

coming involved in an exciting and dynamic school program, especially if the school is able to obtain local newspaper or radio publicity for the project. Success breeds success, and it is often just a question of "breaking the ice" with one member of the community.

A cover letter (sample included on page 10) should accompany the questionnaire sent to the community agencies. This letter should set forth the objectives of the language program and specify the mutual benefits to each partner in this educational venture. The use of personable and articulate students is recommended in the recruitment of and subsequent meetings with interested agencies. However, it is very important that a staff member of the school serve as the coordinator of the project in order to provide answers to questions regarding liability or other practical problems.

Once the surveys have been completed and the questionnaires returned by the community organizations and agencies, the coordinator of the project should contact the respondents individually in order to discuss involvement in the program. Students should be matched with the organizations willing to offer internships or volunteer work. Questions of academic credit need to be discussed with the principal of the school, the director of curriculum, or the local superintendent. A list of interested agencies should be drawn up. This list is an important tool for the foreign language teachers when they plan their courses, hold orientation sessions with their students on the value of foreign language study, and hold individual student conferences. The list should also be made available to the school guidance personnel, who can strengthen the place of foreign languages in the total school curriculum by directing more students to the program because of its increased scope and relevance.

Specific Activities

By compiling an inventory of the resources available in the school community and in the community at large, the foreign language department can plan activities in which these resources are active components.

Class trips. Class trips have always played a popular role in foreign language classes. These trips can be made to local museums, art exhibitions, concerts, foreign language film showings, foreign restaurants, food and specialty shops, and local community service agencies such as the police department, fire department, or hospital emergency room. Prior arrangements must be made with the agency to be visited; it is always advisable to inquire whether a guided tour of the facility is offered. Clearance for the trip must also be secured from the school administration, and the

necessary details--parent consent slips, travel arrangements--must be completed by the teacher who sponsors the trip. The trip should, of course, be pertinent to what is going on in class. There should be discussion and orientation prior to the trip and an evaluation following it. The students should also write a composite letter of appreciation to the organization.

Class trips are limited solely by the facilities available within the geographical region. Each area is unique. Large food-packing and processing companies, government agencies, and military installations are but a few examples of organizations offering diverse experiences to students. Any park affords the teacher the opportunity to bring alive the vocabulary dealing with nature, sports, or a picnic meal.

Special programs. An effective means of winning over the community is to invite members to visit the school as observers or to offer a special program for them--either after school or in the evening--to explain the goals of the foreign language program and to display the students' enthusiasm. Frequently, schools have foreign language fairs or suppers in which the students and their families participate.

A foreign language fair is an exciting undertaking for a department. It provides a relaxed atmosphere for the application and synthesis of the classroom learning experiences. Because all segments of the community can be involved, it is also a means of publicizing the foreign language program. On the other hand, it is a formidable task involving the cooperation of all members of the department with each other and with members of other departments. Meals, games, songs, dances, puppet shows, short skits, or a talent show are some of the possible activities.

The food is usually prepared by the families of the students and is either a special dish from their country of origin or a recipe the students have studied in class in a unit on food. The students sing songs they have learned in class or perform dances they have been taught in language or physical education class. The program of the talent show is as varied as the interests and special abilities of the students. The fair can be held out-of-doors or in the school cafeteria or gymnasium either after school or on a weekend.

When community agencies see the active support and cooperation of the parents, they are more amenable to joining the venture. It is important that these organizations not feel that their participation in the program will be costly, especially in times of national economic hardship. Social amenities such as writing letters of appreciation should be observed in order to encourage these agencies to continue to share their expertise with the school community.

Volunteer work. As educators, we are committed to teaching our students civic responsibility. Volunteer work can help achieve this goal and further the goals of the foreign language program. In areas where there are extensive numbers of speakers of other languages, volunteer work in hospitals, child-care centers, the social security office, or the board of health can provide an invaluable social and educational experience for students. The students can serve as interpreters or aides while observing the functioning of society on a day-to-day basis. The students gain practice in using the language they are studying while aiding the sponsoring agency to meet its obligations. The student learns about his civic responsibility in an active manner whether his foreign language skills are utilized or not.

Work-study programs. Many schools offer work experience programs for students majoring in business education. A liaison is established with local businesses, and students work for the business while completing graduation requirements. They receive valuable experience in the career area they have chosen and remuneration for their services. Identifying businesses that have foreign language needs can also expand this program to accommodate more students. It must be pointed out to students that foreign language skills alone are not a very saleable product. As the benefactors of this program, we must also be aware that due to our students' limited exposure to language study, their foreign language abilities are often weak. Special courses which can help the students achieve greater proficiency can be created in the foreign language and business education programs. Participation in such an alternative educational experience is often the greatest motivation for rapid progress in acquiring the skills necessary for meeting the requisites for a particular job. Course credit in lieu of financial remuneration is also a means of attracting students into a work experience program. The company benefits as well in that it is able to recruit new staff members from the participating students.

Contests. Community associations and clubs are organized to serve the community on a voluntary basis. These organizations are usually very receptive to new ideas and involvement in the life of the community. They frequently are amenable to sponsoring a contest or a particular program and often offer awards such as citations of merit, medals, plaques, and even cash prizes and scholarships. A partnership with a community organization such as the Rotary Club can serve both parties advantageously. Other types of volunteer work and special projects can grow out of the liaisons that are made with these community civic organizations whose members are willing to donate their expertise and time to the foreign language program.

Welcoming committees. Many communities have welcoming committees for new residents. Participating in these activities provides a good opportunity for students and teachers to meet the new resi-

dents and to make them feel part of an active and involved community. When new residents are speakers of other languages, the students in the foreign language program can serve as committee members or interpreters. In their explanation of the services which are available in the community, the students are putting their language skills to good use.

Class participation. Many organizations have staff members who are native speakers of a language other than English, have lived or worked in a country where another language is spoken, or have daily business dealings with people whose dominant language is not English. These people can serve as resource consultants and spark a class by describing their duties, life in another country, the customs of another culture, or the value of gaining proficiency in a second language. Many organizations, such as the telephone company, have education or school departments that concern themselves with maintaining liaison with the educational community, and they are eager to become involved in school programs.

The parents' association of a school is another resource for the foreign language program. Those parents who are native speakers of another language can be invited to volunteer their services as tutors or as cultural consultants. The parents' associations are always willing to cooperate with the teachers to strengthen a program in which they have a vested interest.

Evaluating the Experience

Each generation tends to look upon subsequent generations with dismay or disappointment because their appearance is different or they don't seem to have the same system of values. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. Despite the overt appearance of each new generation, young people are as concerned about the quality of life as were their predecessors. Each generation tries to do something positive for society based on the priorities of the era and the motivation offered by its teachers and the community. Through the provision of diverse opportunities for our youth, we can help them develop a sound system of values.

Involvement of the total community in the educational system is an important and viable means of changing attitudes within the community. There is a fusion of purpose and commitment which strengthens each partner's role in and dedication to the project. The students learn about the complexities of life and how society functions, while the community becomes attuned to the ideas, aspirations, and interests of its youth. The goal of the foreign language program--communication--is in reality the goal of the community, and it is only through reciprocal programs that true communication and understanding can be achieved.

Feedback from everyone involved provides insight into the success of the program and the areas that require attention and remediation. This feedback can be obtained informally (in conversations or brief meetings) or formally (by means of a questionnaire). The questionnaire may pose basic questions that only require a check mark in an appropriate column, but it should also provide space for comments concerning the value of the project and for suggestions for improving the program.

One of the most positive gains of community involvement in foreign language programs through a resource-sharing experience is that foreign language study is seen in a new light. The community is made aware of the objectives of the program and the need for foreign language study. Students are made aware of the value of foreign language study in career education and its viability in a broad spectrum of occupations. Foreign language study is not looked upon as a "frill" but rather as a sensible, necessary, and practical component of the educational program for every student.

By evaluating the activities that can be cooperatively sponsored and planned with the community, the school can adjust its educational program and redesign it to meet specific community needs. Emphasis on the development and perfection of certain skills of language learning can be provided in the school curriculum once these priorities are identified. Students can be better trained to meet the needs of the immediate community in which they will live, work, and serve as leaders. Education is no longer an isolated undertaking.

Conclusion

No school operates without using community resources. The students themselves are the natural resources with which every educational program is endowed. Yet there is an abundance of other resources waiting to be tapped in the community which can enrich, stimulate, and challenge the students. The use of all of these resources unites the school and the community in a mutually beneficial venture. Because of the diverse and ever-changing nature of the community, the effective use of its resources in the foreign language program presents a continuous challenge to educators.

Sample Questionnaire for Students

Name: _____ Class: _____
Last Name First

Address: _____
Zip Code

Telephone: _____

Year of graduation: _____

Language(s) studied: _____

Language(s) spoken at home: _____

Hobbies and special interests:

Travel: (indicate country, year, duration of visit, purpose of trip)

Membership in local organizations: (Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, etc.)

Sample Questionnaire for Staff

Name: _____
Last Name First

Address: _____
Zip Code

Telephone: _____

Major area of study: _____

Minor area(s) of study: _____

Language(s) studied: _____

Language(s) spoken at home: _____

Hobbies, special interest, special talents:

Travel: (indicate country, year, duration of visit, purpose of trip)

Membership in local organizations:

Sample Cover Letter to a Community Agency

(Note: This letter should be written on official school stationery.)

Dear (Director of Agency):

The foreign language department of (name of school) is actively involved in an exciting educational program for our students. The objective of our foreign language program is to provide our students with the basic skills to enable them to use the language as an active means of oral and written communication. We also strive to foster cross-cultural understanding and a strong sense of civic responsibility.

Our educational program is designed to offer our students a diverse and meaningful learning experience both within the school building and in the immediate community. It is to achieve the latter goal that we have taken the liberty of writing to you.

Learning becomes meaningful and important to our youth when they are able to see the immediate use and results of their hard work. Our innovative program in foreign languages provides our students with many alternative educational experiences that enhance what is learned in the classroom. Perhaps you can be of help to us in expanding the variety and scope of this alternative education. We welcome guest speakers in our classes and at assembly programs and encourage students to participate in community internship programs and volunteer work.

May we ask you to complete the enclosed questionnaire? The information that you provide us about your organization may help us to establish a valuable partnership. We are grateful for your time and for any consideration you extend to us.

Sincerely yours,

(Coordinator of Program)

Sample Questionnaire for Community Agency

Name of organization or agency: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

Name of person in charge: _____

Title of person in charge: _____

Brief description of the objectives of your organization, services offered, etc.

Are foreign languages part of your needs? Yes____ No____

If YES, which languages? _____

Are you willing to participate in our educational program?
Yes____ No____

If YES, How? Guest speakers_____

Film loans_____

Student internship program_____

Student volunteer program_____

Field trips_____

Other_____(please explain)

Please return this questionnaire to:

We are grateful for your time and interest in our program.

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